

VZCZCXYZ0008
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHKB #0097/01 0361240
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 051240Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAKU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4702
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 2617
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 0811
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAKU 000097

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/05/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI POLICE DISRUPT JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES'
SERVICE

REF: 07 BAKU 00007

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Joan Polaschik for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) On January 30, approximately 30 police reportedly disrupted a Jehovah's Witnesses' worship service around noon in the central Azerbaijani town of Barda. There were 16 members attending the service, which was held in the home of Barda resident Nasiba Guliyeva. Guliyeva refused to allow the police to enter for approximately five hours, according to Georgia-based Jehovah's Witnesses advocate Robert Delahaije. (Delahaije is a regular Embassy contact regarding religious freedom issues. Delahaije previously lived in Azerbaijan, but was deported in January 2007 on charges of proselytizing - reftel. He still maintains regular contact with Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan.) After the service was finished, Guliyeva opened the door for the Jehovah's Witnesses members to return to their homes, but the police entered the residence.

12. (C) According to Delahaije and Guliyeva, the police were particularly aggressive with the male Jehovah's Witnesses, throwing several of them on the floor and hitting them. At approximately 17:30, the police took five of the male members to a local police station, where they were held for several hours and then released. Guliyeva claimed the police verbally and physically abused the five males while they were in detention. Guliyeva told us the police did not have any documents authorizing their raid, but the police claimed their actions were authorized by Aghalar Maharramov, the Barda district police chief.

13. (C) Guliyeva is a school teacher in Barda, where she works with a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) in an English language program. Peace Corps staff heard about the case from the Barda-based PCV and subsequently informed the Embassy. Guliyeva told the PCV and the Embassy that local government officials were attempting to intimidate her, claiming they would increase her teaching load so that she would have no time for spreading her faith.

14. (C) On February 5, Guliyeva told us that local officials asked one of her brothers, who is a municipal head, to encourage Guliyeva to stop her religious activities or leave Barda. Guliyeva also said that Kamil Aliyev (one of the five Jehovah's Witnesses who was detained on January 30), was arrested on February 4 and will be imprisoned for 10 days on charges of reckless driving. Guliyeva said Aliyev's car had slid off an icy road, but police used the occasion to press criminal charges against him.

¶15. (C) Azerbaijani law forbids foreigners from proselytizing Azerbaijani citizens, but it does not explicitly bar Azerbaijani citizens from seeking to change other Azerbaijani citizens' religions. In practice, however, local officials often harrass Azerbaijani citizens who seek to proselytize other Azerbaijani citizens. Since the prosletizing charge cannot stick to Azerbaijani citizens, officials often rely on registration issues as the legal grounds for raiding a religious service. Religious groups conducting worship services in private homes are particularly vulnerable on these grounds, as they often technically are unregistered even though they may be part of a registered church in Baku or another city.

¶16. (C) In general, Azerbaijani officials and society are negatively predisposed to the Jehovah's Witnesses, regarding them with a high level of suspicion. Two reasons appear to underpin this opinion. First, the Jehovah's Witnesses generally are very active in trying to make new converts, which is often perceived by Azerbaijanis as attempting to change one's cultural and religious Muslim identity. Second, Jehovah's Witnesses are often perceived as being pro-Armenian, in part because some male Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to fulfill their obligatory military service on conscientious objection grounds. The press often seizes on the theme of the Jehovah's Witnesses' alleged links to Armenia. Press coverage of the January 30 police raid in Yeni Musavat (newspaper for the opposition Musavat party) is reflective of this broader trend. After providing some of the facts of the case, the article concluded: "We must note that one of the main goals of this sect is to discourage young people from joining the army. This sect is said to

have been banned in Christian countries as well. The missionaries have arrived in Azerbaijan in masses and are engaged in damaging propaganda here."

¶17. (C) Guliyeva's story parallels increasing reports of GOAJ pressure against perceived "non-traditional" religious groups. The police raid in Barda occurs in the context of a broader GOAJ effort to pressure religious communities not controlled by the Caucasus Muslim Board or the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA). This government effort appears to be particularly focused against devout Muslims and Christian communities that are perceived as "non-traditional." We will seek the SCRWA,s views on this case and urge the GOAJ to ensure that its tradition of religious tolerance extends to "non-traditional" religious groups.

DERSE